

Traditional Knowledge in Modern Classrooms

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In the late 2000s, I was associated with organisations working in the field of environmental conservation and restoration when I came across several communities that were conserving their forests. The relationship communities shared with the forests fascinated me. I realised that though the conservation of forests was based on religion, superstition, myth, ecological services and subsistence, these practices which are deeply enmeshed with conservation practices also keep traditional knowledge systems alive. Traditional knowledge emerges from conservation practices and also contributes to ecological awareness and consciousness.

Future of environmental ethics

During my field visits, I observed that the young members of the community did not share the same belief systems as their elders. In Uttarakhand, the focus was on getting an education and grabbing a white-collar job and eventually migrating. In Madhya Pradesh, there were multiple factors at play. The *Baiga* community faced forest alienation and displacement due to the demand for protected area for the Kanha National Park, which kept expanding. Resorts and hotels took land on lease and started employing the *Baigas* as support staff. Members of the community also migrated to nearby cities. Gradually, the younger generation started losing their sense of belonging and connection with the forests.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the status of the forests is unclassified, and the ownership lies with the community. There I saw that although the conservation ethic has reduced in the younger generation, religious fear still persists. On one occasion, a certain village traded a hill with the army for the construction of a tunnel. Subsequently, many people in the village fell critically ill and the villagers attributed it to the 'disrespect' they had shown to Mother Nature by trading off the hill. However, the younger generation is gradually moving away from the traditional occupations of farming and yak-herding. The distance between the young and the forests is growing.

I visited schools and interacted with young students in various locations. I realised that the modern school curriculum seldom includes traditional knowledge systems or engages the students in inculcating environmental ethics. I also felt a hierarchy of knowledge systems in school education: the traditional knowledge systems would be the prerogative of the older generation and the young would unabashedly admit their ignorance of the same. The traditional knowledge system would be dismissed as 'old school', without recognising its potential in generating environmental ethics amongst children. For instance, a *Kumaoni* (person from the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand) knows the importance of an oak tree in maintaining the water level of the traditional step-wells. A child being educated in the state curriculum, who does not get this knowledge, might not see the importance of protecting the oak forests and would systematically get alienated from the forests.

Thus, it becomes imperative to engage children in various activities to generate an eco-centric ideal in a classroom. The immediate question is: how to do it? The teachers are engaged in giving information in classroom transactions. For example, the children might know the phenomenon of photosynthesis but not how it impacts their lives.

Classroom activities to inculcate ecological consciousness

Understanding our local 'friends'

In the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, I witnessed the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) team making a beautiful intervention in the schools. They had come up with small activity books filled with activities like joining the dots, crosswords, colouring blank space, finding similarities, filling in the blanks, and matching words. All the activities were designed to raise awareness of the wild species present in the district. For instance, there was an activity to differentiate between venomous and non-venomous snakes and why it is important to conserve snakes. The facilitators from WWF had taken classroom sessions on the activities and had

trained the teachers to continue. The local names of animals were used.

Herbariums

Students can be asked to collect local species of flora and make herbariums with the local name, key characteristics and use of each. In the process, they will get to know the plant by its name and use, will be able to identify it and also understand its role in the ecosystem.

Sow and grow

Each child can be given a small pot and a seed and helped to plant the seed. The child can be asked to observe the seed each day and maintain a journal. The plant may be given a name as well. As the plant grows, the teacher can talk a bit about how a plant breathes, how it feels and how it can communicate.

Our living soil

Children can be taken out and asked to dig the soil and identify the bugs and worms in the soil. The teacher could elaborate on the role of each in maintaining the quality of the soil. This activity will change their perception that 'soil' is dirty, and children will gradually learn to be comfortable

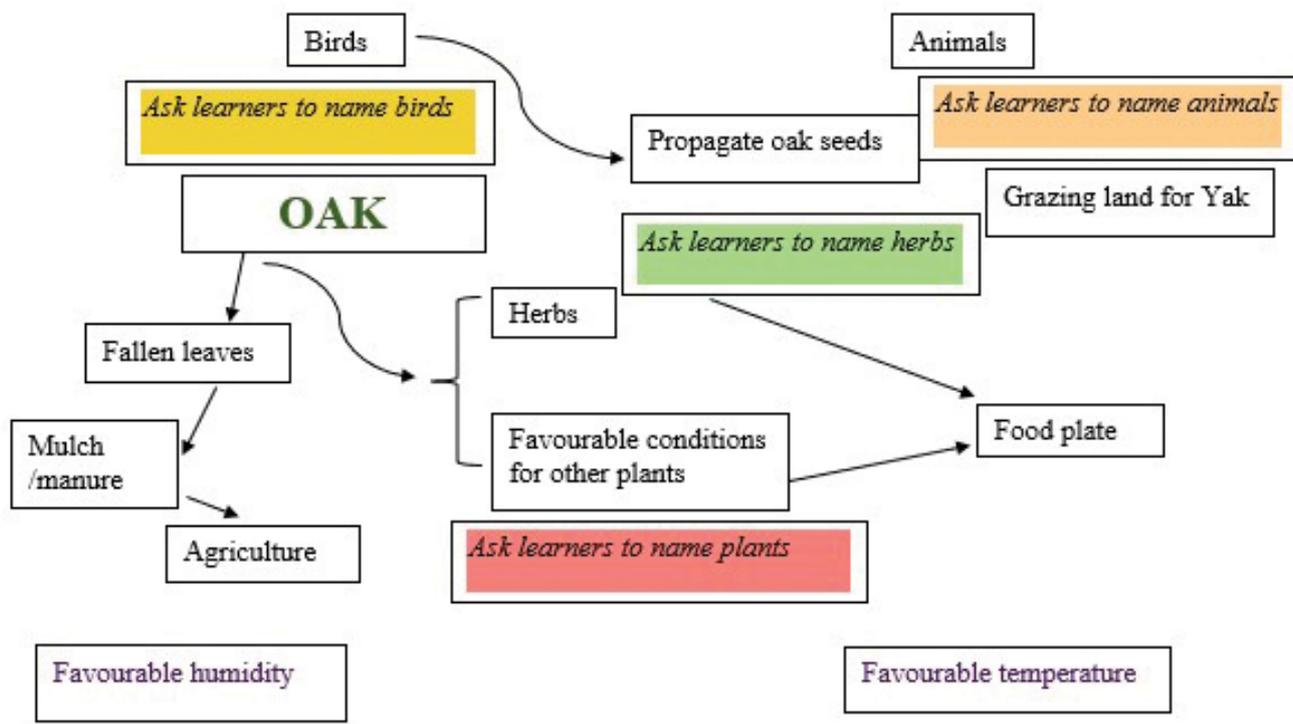
touching it. The teacher could also ask children to describe the feeling of touching soil.

Growing our food

In the Viswema village in Kohima, Nagaland, the K Khel school had recently grabbed the headlines for running its mid-day meal kitchen with the vegetables grown by the students in the small backyard plot. The vegetables are grown organically. In doing this, children learn about growing food and about their traditional knowledge systems. They also develop a strong connection with the soil and Mother Earth.

One world, one family

Children can be taken on field trips to different local ecosystems. For instance, children of Thembang village in the West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh can be taken to the higher altitudes on a trek and asked to enumerate the species they see in the forests and repeat the exercise at lower altitudes. This will facilitate drawing a species-relationship diagram where they will highlight the connection between the different species at different altitudes. A discussion can further describe how all species are a part of one big family and why it is important that all species are protected.



OUR ECOSYSTEM - OUR BIG FAMILY

Figure 1. Understanding the importance of maintaining biodiversity.

The chart (Figure 1) can be used to show the fallacy of monocultures. In the chart, the number of a certain species can be increased, and children asked to describe the consequences. Suppose all the oak trees are cut and instead only pine trees are planted in the higher altitudes, which are the species that will be directly affected? How will that affect the other members of the 'family', including human beings? The importance of maintaining biodiversity can thus be explained.

Ecology in folklore

Children can be asked to collect stories from folklore. The teacher can take up one story per session. The stories will have to be analysed beforehand by the

teacher so that he/she can facilitate the discussion on it in such a way that it highlights the components of nature in traditional stories.

Festivals and nature

During local festivals, children could be asked to identify the integration of nature in the rituals. The teacher can elaborate on the importance of the concerned species. The teaching-learning processes can go a long way in inculcating a strong environmental ethic amongst children. This will play a significant role in developing an ecologically conscious future generation of adults. The process of replacing anthropocentrism with ecocentrism can only begin in a classroom.



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